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ABSTRACT

To help educators improve their school public relations (PR) programs, this handbook tells them how to identify and communicate with "special publics" and how to evaluate their communication efforts. An introductory overview points out that two-thirds to three-quarters of the adult population have no children in school and that schools need to reach these publics. Chapter 1 recommends beginning by analyzing the community and the district's existing PR efforts, categorizing and prioritizing the publics, preparing district staff, pushing community involvement, writing PR plans, and ensuring that PR activities have adequate resources. The special publics enumerated in chapter 2, include the business and real estate communities, religious institutions, senior citizens, community organizations, government agencies, higher education institutions, private schools, and youth groups. Chapter 3 discusses how to reach these publics using information dissemination (including speakers, school visits, and the mass media), advocacy groups for public education, campaigns on school issues, community expertise for instruction and management assistance, and learning assistance (both for and from schools). Evaluation methods suggested in chapter 4 include an "early warning system" to monitor public attitudes, community surveys, and PR assessment groups. The final chapter briefly summarizes the handbook. (RW)

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BASIC SCHOOL PR KIT

BASIC SCHOOL PR GUIDE

Involving ALL Your Publics

EA 015 217

One in a series of eight school public relations guides which contain concise, tested and practical ideas.

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Introduction

NSPRA's **Basic School PR Kit,** of which this guide is a part, is designed to provide specific, practical help for educators in starting or improving school PR programs. The Kit has been developed in response to the hundreds of requests for help NSPRA receives each year. Material on vital public relations topics is presented in the most concise, usable format possible.

The basic concept of public relations is explained on cassette tape by Edward L. Bernays, the man who pioneered the field of public relations in the 1920s. Important school PR topics are covered in detail in eight tightly-written guides. Additional materials are included in a resource packet containing public relations standards, proven ideas that work, and a PR planning guide and worksheet.

Altogether, the **Basic School PR Kit** is a short course in school PR fundamentals, a refresher for existing programs, a ready reference for dealing with problems that arise and a resource for anyone working to build public confidence in education.

This guide, *Involving ALL Your Publics,* is based on the fact that today, two-thirds to three-fourths of the adult population do not have children in school. Those who control elections, pay most of the taxes, shape public opinion and, in general, control our schools, don't have a personal interest in them. We must seek new and creative ways to reach this critical group. This guide tells you how to identify your special publics, communicate with them and make sure your efforts are on target. Suggestions are given for working with the business community, realtors, the religious community, youth agencies, senior citizens and many others.

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Overview

It's trite to say, but true. American education is on trial. And the list of challenges is long, formidable and growing. In fact, there are those who believe that maintaining the public school system is the major issue of the '80s. Some go even further.

Fred Hechinger, former *New York Times* education editor, writes that "America is in headlong retreat from its commitment to education. Political confusion and economic uncertainty have shaken the people's faith in education as the key to financial and social success. This retreat ought to be the most pertinent issue in any examination of the country's condition . . . at stake is nothing less than the survival of American democracy."

While there is certainly room for disagreement about the causes of impending educational doom as well as the possible solutions, nearly all school advocates are calling for massive efforts to restore public confidence in the public schools. A commendable goal, indeed, but much easier said than done.

The fact is, educational leaders have been making speeches about declining public confidence for more than a decade. And as everyone knows, the public's faith in schools has continued to plummet. Admittedly, it has been tough to restore confidence in the midst of the increasing economic, social and political problems education has been forced to face. On the other hand, most efforts to reach the public have been a case of too little and too late . . . or more aptly, a case of either too much lip service or too much of the same old tired public relations approaches.

Good public relations has always been the art of identifying key publics, and establishing workable mechanisms for informing and listening to them with a goal of improving the institution and its services. Over the years, there have been some exceptional individual school PR programs based upon such simple models. Overall, however, most attempts have been inconsistent and ineffective.

In light of what the polls say about public awareness of school programs, educators obviously haven't succeeded in their efforts to inform. And despite the trend toward citizen advisory committees, community participation and other involvement techniques, there are also numerous indicators that educators haven't even been listening.

But the biggest problem may be with the most elementary part of the public relations process . . . **identifying key publics.** While educators have traditionally maintained that schools belong to the public, besides working with the news media (and not always very effectively), most external PR efforts have been focused on parents. Certainly, parents are a key public which must be continually informed and involved.

But as the decade of the '80s rolled around, statistics indicate that **two-thirds to three-fourths of the adult population no longer have children in schools.** And the trend won't reverse significantly in the foreseeable future. In fact, when the decade of the '90s begins, statistics show that there will be **more senior citizens in America than children of school age.**

What this means is that those who control elections . . . pay most of the taxes . . . shape public opinion . . . and in general control public education, no longer have a stake or personal interest in the form of a child in the public schools. And just as important, these same special publics have the means and the ability, **if so motivated,** to provide the needed support, additional resources, and learning opportunities for students that schools couldn't buy even if they had the money.

This shift in demographics has tremendous public relations implications for educators — not only in terms of their communication targets, but particularly their communication approaches. **News media** — the old standby of PR efforts — are still as important as ever since newspapers and broadcast media continue to be the source of information for this **new majority audience.** But that's as far as it goes. You can't send them your newsletters with the kids . . . and you can't expect them to come to PTA meetings or open houses.

New and creative efforts will be required if educators are going to reach this critical group. And that's what this booklet is all about: **identifying those special publics** . . . planning for and communicating with them . . . and suggesting ways to make sure your efforts are on target.

Public confidence in, and the continued existence of public education as we know it, depends to a great extent upon how well educators deal with this new majority. Even American democracy may be at stake.

Chapter 1
Planning For Those Special Publics — Gearing Up

School public relations efforts, just like instructional programs, have to be tailored to meet individual needs. There are no models or magic formulas that you can borrow or steal that will meet your exact requirements. Each community, school district and school has its own unique constituency. Accordingly, the levels of understanding . . . the necessary messages . . . the communications vehicles . . . the involvement techniques will all vary. But regardless of your situation, several elements remain constant. If you want to reach those special publics, it will take commitment and a lot of long, hard work. And, as with any effective undertaking, it begins with good planning. In fact, you don't stand a chance unless your PR plans are at least as well thought out as those for other programs in the school system.

Step One: Analysis

Before getting started, you need to know where you are and where you want to go. That calls for a little soul searching on your current activities, a closer look at your community, and a realistic assessment of the needs and interests of your special publics in relation to those of your schools.

- **Existing Efforts.** Take a look at what you are presently doing. In addition to news coverage, are you reaching those special publics without children in your schools (non-parents) in other ways? Make several lists. How are you informing them? How are you listening to them? What involvement techniques and activities for involvement do you have for them?

  After you get your lists together, go over them item-by-item to determine how effective you've been. Is each activity accomplishing its purpose? How can it be improved? Is it necessary? Is it counter-productive? Involve others in the pro-

cess. Discuss your lists with staff members responsible for implementation of your plans. Ask the specific target audience.

While such a process is time consuming and certainly not fool proof, it accomplishes several important purposes. First, it gives you a good springboard for improving and expanding your efforts to reach your special audiences (publics). Secondly, it communicates to staff and the community that you are sincere in your commitment to this important aspect of your schools' public relations program.

- **Community Analysis.** Before you can complete your assessment of current activities or begin planning new approaches, an updated analysis of the community is a must. Your analysis methods can be as sophisticated or as simple as desired. Again, the key is selecting a method that best meets your own needs and resources. The necessary information abounds both internally and externally and the people-power to get the job done can be found both internally and externally. Some suggestions are included in other guides in the **NSPRA Basic PR Kit.**

  Regardless of the approach or its complexity, there are certain basic things to look for. For example, what about your community's social climate . . . economic and political conditions . . . the demographic structure . . . even the past history of and current support for schools? More importantly, you'll want to pinpoint key community groups and individuals and seek special information about them. Groups are formed for special reasons, and you need to know certain specifics: their organizational and staffing patterns, activities, membership, objectives, interests, resources and history. Who are your community leaders? The major impact of individuals in a community — who are either recognized leaders or behind-the-scenes workers — is usually one of **opinion shaping.** Therefore, knowing who they are, their views, and their preferred styles of leadership is of critical importance.

  The goal, of course, is for you to put together an up-to-date profile on the community — and the issues trends, and interests impacting on it and its key groups and individuals.
- **Categorizing Publics.** Any community analysis should provide information for developing a listing of groups and individuals according to categories based on interest in schools and resources available for possible school use. The interest rating could be as simple as a scale ranging from high to low, or positive to negative, or even a matrix indicating both perspectives. Remember, a group can be highly interested in and yet very negative toward schools, or vice versa.

Listing groups by resource categories is also essential. Potentially, most groups can offer at least one of the following: human resources, materials, equipment, financial support, and communication channels. Obviously, those with a high and positive interest in schools are most likely to make such resources available. But don't eliminate any group until you've developed a profile on it. Nearly every group has some interest, either intense or latent, in schools. And such interest will usually involve a self-serving element.

- **Prioritizing Publics.** You will probably learn more about some groups and individuals than you ever really wanted to know. And the truth is, there will be more groups (publics) to work with than you can probably handle. So a critical part of the analysis process is setting priorities. Based upon the earlier assessment of current PR activities, new knowledge of the community, and the needs of your schools, you're going to have to make some tough decisions about the priority special publics on which to focus your energies. Before you complete the task you might want to update your list of district and individual school needs, particularly in light of the resources available from various groups. **The main mission is determining what relationships with which publics are going to be the most beneficial.**

Step Two: Preparing Staff

There's an old saying that public relations begins at home. With that in mind, it should be noted that all the recommendations contained in this publication were developed with the assumption that those interested in reaching special external publics already had an effective staff relations (internal) program. If that isn't the case, stop here and read the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) guide on *Internal Communications* included in this **Basic School PR Kit.** Remember, your communication efforts with external publics cannot be successful, at least not for very long, unless you have an effective program of internal communications.

The fact is, every school employee is a member of the public relations team. To be contributing members, they have to be informed, involved, aware of their PR responsibilities, and adequately prepared to help with the process. The following are additional suggestions for getting geared up internally to deal with those special publics.

- **Policies and Procedures.** Get out your board policies and

administrative procedures. Make sure that community involvement is encouraged. Without such formal and official endorsement and direction, your efforts may end before they can begin.

- **Provide Leadership.** Even policies and procedures won't get the ball rolling without a little subtle (or not so subtle) selling. Subordinates have a tendency to watch and listen for cues from their leaders on what's important. So let them know that community involvement is a priority. **Teach it . . . preach it . . . screech it.** And do it over and over and over again. Insist that managers at all levels do the same. It won't sink in over night, but if you're persistent and you recognize those who become missionaries; working with special publics will become a part of your school system tradition. Finally, don't forget that actions speak louder than words. So practice what you preach.
- **Involve Staff.** Employees at all levels should be involved in the planning as well as the implementation process. Their knowledge and enthusiasm will be a definite plus, and they can make the selling process easier. Such involvement can be time consuming, but you will reap benefits.
- **Training and Recognition.** The staff must be adequately prepared to help carry out community involvement responsibilities. Keep them informed about new thrusts, their roles, and what they can do to help. Provide periodic workshops so they can acquire the skills and tools to do the job. And again, don't forget to develop a rewards and recognition program for those who **go the extra mile in working with special publics.**
- **Assigning Responsibilities.** An obvious, but frequently forgotten element in any program is making certain that a top level staff member is charged with direction of the overall community involvement program. But there will be a number of activities at all levels of the school district that can go astray unless someone knows it's his or her responsibility to see the project through. A common complaint from community groups is that no liaison person was appointed to work with them, or that the one who was didn't understand or do the job. **Be meticulous in matching the right person with the right group.**

Step Three: Preparing The Final Checklist

By now you've reviewed your current PR activities, analyzed the community, and prepared the staff. You've got a long list of new

and exciting ideas you want to tackle. But hold on just a little longer. Good planning dictates that you make certain you've done all your research — pre-planning — before moving into the implementation phase. Develop a **final check list** including some of the following suggestions.

- **Written Plans.** Have you committed your plans for reaching your special publics to writing? Each activity should be spelled out, including objectives (measurable if possible), procedures, necessary resources, time schedule, and plans for assessment. Written plans not only insure better planning, but they also serve as a communication vehicle providing those who need to know with all the necessary details.
- **Insist Others Do the Same.** While written plans for the overall school district PR effort are a must, each major department and school should also have an individual PR plan in writing, including how it will relate to its special publics. Such planning will not only help them "get their acts together," but a review of these written strategies will assist in finalizing the overall district effort. It is equally important that all those developing new programs or projects include a communications plan or PR component in each proposal.
- **Check Key Lubricants.** Take one last look at the elements essential to keep your program running smoothly. Have you allocated enough staff, funds and materials to get the proposed job done? Does the staff responsible understand the mission? Is the timing right? Are progress check points built into the assessment plan? And perhaps most importantly, have you considered overall district goals? You don't have the time or the resources to waste on activities that don't undergird school priorities — **student learning.**
- **Vary Activities.** While there is a limit to the number of projects involving your special publics, activities must be varied to insure achievement of your basic objectives. For example, let's assume that you want to reach non-parents for the following reasons: to provide information, to learn about their concerns, to obtain feedback, to build support, and to seek out additional resources for the instructional program. That means the activities you've planned should include enough variety to assure success. You need regular information vehicles, opportunities for face-to-face communication, involvement mechanisms, feedback channels, and action groups, and you need to make sure they are continuous, on-going efforts and not one-time endeavors.

A Final Note

Many of the preceding recommendations may sound idealistic and almost impossible to accomplish in light of the other challenges you face. Some of them overlap and may even appear to be out of logical order. But don't worry about it. They weren't intended to serve as gospel.

The major goal is to emphasize the importance of careful and thorough planning as a part of the PR process. Most of it is common sense. Your schools and your community are unique . . . different than any others. Decide what works best for you.

Chapter 2
Involving Those Special Publics — How To Do It

Books, seminars, and speakers discussing public relations usually place a strong emphasis on theory, processes, and other generalities. Enough is enough, you say. You've heard all the theories. You want specific ideas that will help you involve those special publics. Well, that's what this chapter is all about. It includes ideas that have worked.

Key Special Publics

Regardless of the size of your community and district, there are several key publics you should consider in planning PR efforts. While many of these groups include some parents, most of their constituents are non-parents.

- **Business Community.** If there was ever a natural partner of the

public schools, the business community is it. Businesses have a vested interest in good schools — a well trained work force and quality education for the children of their employees. In fact, you can't separate the quality of life in a community from the quality of its schools. And business people know that.

The secret to involving the business community is taking advantage of that vested interest. Since most business leaders are busy, and often feel the schools don't want their help, educators must become **active and take the first step.** Begin by identifying key business leaders, individual firms, and business organizations. Develop a systematic plan for contacting them, including personal visits and invitations to breakfast or lunch.

At this point, you should find most business people pleased with your interest in them and positive about helping the schools. But don't get caught unprepared to suggest specific ways businesses can be of assistance. Many potential partnerships have dissolved early because educators weren't ready to take advantage of them. Get together with appropriate staff members **before** you contact businesses. Discuss the concept, develop a long list of proposed activities, determine staff responsibility for coordination and follow through.

Once you have developed several successful working relationships, the job of expanding your **business-education partnership** effort should become even easier. You will have a track record to point to as an example of the benefits of such activities. Involved business leaders are frequently willing and eager to sell the idea to their colleagues. Some school systems have developed agreements with chambers of commerce or other business organizations, who have in turn taken the lead in being **advocates for business-education partnerships.**

- **Real Estate Community.** While realtors and realty groups are part of the business establishment, for a variety of reasons they deserve special attention. The fact is, **realtors sell your schools every day** . . . for better or for worse. The better they know you and your schools, the better job they can and will do in the selling job.

  Because school information is frequently first on the inquiry list of potential home buyers, the real estate industry is usually eager to establish a good working relationship with educators. Again, a successul partnership depends on how well you prepare in advance.

  Most communities will not only have individual firms and agents, but also real estate organizations. Your task is to

identify them, make contact, and find out how you can assist them in their work. Most realtors want basic school information — attendance zones, enrollment procedures, and program offerings. Offer them publications, maps and other materials. Establish a liaison or contact person to answer inquiries and keep them supplied with up-to-date materials.

Since the real estate market is ever changing, and because there is frequent turnover in personnel, the industry thrives on staff training and other meetings. Offer staff and materials for such sessions, provide school facilities for meeting sites, and schedule frequent tours of your schools for agents.

Contact should also be made with boards of realtors who can sometimes serve as advocates for good school relationships or even as distributors of school information to their members. Don't ignore commercial real estate firms who frequently need to know the strong points of your schools when they're trying to attract new business or industry to your community. In some areas large realty firms and banks have relocation services to assist employees and/or companies moving to the community. Volunteer to help them with their work — send school staff along on orientation sessions for the employees prior to their move, provide packets of materials, and offer individual counseling and school tours.

- **Religious Institutions.** Organized religion is one of the most influential institutions in every American community. And historically, churches and synagogues have maintained strong ties with education. But in recent years, a growing concern about the separation of church and state has led many educators to hesitate about involving this important public. Don't make this mistake in planning your PR efforts.

  A carefully planned and orchestrated partnership with the religious community can pay great dividends. Begin by meeting with the leaders of religious groups and organizations to explore workable activities. Since ministers, rabbis, and other spiritual leaders are key communicators, it's in your best interest to keep them informed about school programs, plans, progress, and problems. Many educators send their newsletters and news releases directly to churches, others conduct regular meetings with religious groups and leaders, a few ask for special announcements to be made from the pulpit or through church bulletin inserts.

  In some communities, "Information Sundays" have become an annual tradition prior to the opening of school,

communication networks have been set up by ministers and rabbis, community forums on the importance of education have been sponsored by religious organizations, and educators have been invited to share the pulpit. Many congregations provide volunteers for local schools and have established tutorial centers in churches or synagogues to help neighborhood children. The opportunities for involvement and information dissemination between schools and their religious communities are endless.

- **Senior Citizens.** The largest growing special interest group in this country is the elderly . . . and the potential for a serious confrontation between senior citizens and public education is increasing in direct proportion. Many — particularly those retired, on a fixed income, and fighting a losing battle with today's inflationary economy — have serious reservations about the benefits they personally derive from public education. As school enrollments decline and budgets increase, those who were only vocally negative about schools in the past are now joining with fellow senior citizens to formulate action programs.

  What can be done about this? One step is to begin by providing or working to pass legislation to provide whatever tax exemptions are legally and financially possible for these senior citizens . . . and let them know what you are doing. Next you need to begin a campaign to remind senior citizens of the value of public education in maintaining a strong community and country. Obviously, such an effort should include more than words. You need to offer them some direct benefits.

  Many school districts have initiated "gold card programs" whereby senior citizens are entitled to free or reduced admission to school programs, activities, and sports events. Others offer reduced-price meals . . . special classes and courses . . . meeting rooms for senior citizen groups . . . and special recognition, such as "grandparents or senior citizens days."

  If you can't get them to come to you, you need to go to them. Student performances and classes at retirement homes and centers are good ideas. Many older people enjoy involvement with children, and their knowledge and available time make them prime candidates for your school volunteer programs.

  Contact organizations and agencies that work with these senior citizens. Determine their interests and needs and make efforts to get them involved.

- **Community Organizations.** Most individuals have a basic need to belong, and more often than not, do, to a meaningful group or organization. Every school district has numerous civic and service groups that were formed to improve some aspect of community life. You need to identify such groups in your area and match their interests with your needs.

  Put together a systematic plan for getting the school story to such groups. Send speakers, materials, and student performers. Ask them to help as volunteers and speakers; to provide scholarships, materials, and other support services.
- **Governmental Agencies.** While many intergovernmental relationships are required by statutes and guidelines, some meaningful and beneficial possibilities are often overlooked and even ignored by school officials. Many federal, state, and local agencies provide resources and services that can be helpful to your schools if you are aware and take advantage of them. In addition, since government is one of the nation's largest employers at all levels, the communications possibilities are unlimited.

  Identify key governmental agencies in your community. Make contact with their officials and determine what resources they have to offer — materials, expertise, information, grants, job opportunities for youth, as field trip sites, etc. Find out their primary interests in your schools and explore ways to improve communications between them and their employees. Develop a continuing relationship by asking them to appoint a contact person to work with you or a staff person.
- **Educational Institutions.** Identifying other educational institutions as key publics might seem strange on the surface, but a second look emphasizes potential benefits for your schools. Institutions of higher learning provide a number of services to help public schools. It's in your best interest to identify key communicators at colleges and universities in your area and to keep them well informed about your institution. These institutions and staff members can assist in providing a number of staff inservice training opportunities; developing and conducting surveys; undertaking needed research projects, and assist in evaluating district programs.
- **Private and Parochial Schools.** These should be viewed as partners rather than competitors with public schools. Such an attitude acknowledges the mutual needs of public and private schools and higher education. A strong public school system helps create and maintain a vital community, which in turn

attracts patrons for the other institutions. Educational options will keep all groups striving for excellence, and the consumers (students) will have a better product as a result. Cooperative relationships between public and private schools actually encourage each other to draw on the others' resources.

Establish an education council or consortium in your community. Exchange information and explore ways you can help each other. Mutual respect will be enhanced, and programs of all concerned can be improved. For example, teachers can exchange ideas and observe new innovations in practice. Some private schools have offered tutoring of public school children as a fulfillment of their senior community-service requirement, and private school drama, music, and student government groups have helped enrich public school non-academic pursuits.

- **Youth Groups.** Scouting organizations, Campfire Girls, Boys Clubs, Red Cross, the Y's, and other youth organizations have traditionally maintained strong ties with schools. But most of the communication has been one-way, with the organizations seeking out schools for assistance and support. When cooperation was not satisfactory or possible, negative relationships sometimes developed. Since such groups touch many families and are often supported by influential non-parents, schools should make a special effort to develop strong partnerships with them.

  One good approach is to establish a council composed of representatives of each of the youth groups in your community. Through the council you can identify individual needs and resources and plan cooperative ventures. Youth groups can help schools with after class activities, offer facilities and campsites, provide leadership and even job opportunities for students, and assist in organization and coordination of tutoring activities. Schools can help them in similar activities . . . and each will be stronger as a result.

Coordination Strategies

At this point you're probably thinking there is no way you can tackle all of these special publics. You probably already have a number of other activities underway involving parents, the PTA, and advisory councils. And you may be concerned that these existing groups could become threatened by your attention to and

involvement of newcomers. You also have a concern about energy, time, and resources to expand your efforts.

Since we've already agreed that you really don't have a choice if you're going to survive, it becomes essential to find a coordination strategy that best meets your needs. The place to begin is with your internal structure. Develop a staff coordinating committee or council composed of key managers and individual staff members assigned the responsibility for working with various publics.

More difficult to develop, but just as necessary is some type of external coordinating mechanism . . . an organized way to get the various publics to plan and work together. As always, there are no sure-fire models tailor-made for each and every situation. You're going to have to be creative. One example you might want to review is **Dallas' Community Network for Public Education.** In operation for nearly five years, the Dallas network serves as an "umbrella" for all groups working to improve the schools. It is composed of representatives of **eight different task forces** — special interest groups ranging from the business community to the PTA — who meet monthly to report on individual activities and to plan mutual undertakings.

The network was formed on the theory that a community can be organized into groups that have special interests in public education, as well as common interests. The network structure, which includes no bylaws or formal voting, allows each community segment to do its own thing while joining with others on certain common causes. In effect, the network is a planning, coordination, and communication vehicle.

Each task force, under the leadership of a prominent Dallas citizen, has been involved in a number of activities and projects ranging from tours to tutoring. As an overall unit, the network has taken on several major efforts including public information campaigns, an annual public opinion survey of schools, a study of day care services, and a recommended program of education for responsible parenthood.

The Dallas Community Network may not be an appropriate or workable model for you. But the point is, you will need a systematic approach for coordinating the involvement of your key publics. Such a mechanism will not only make the job easier for you, but it can improve the quality of involvement by allowing various groups to share ideas and join forces on mutual projects for your schools.

Chapter 3
How-To-Do-It Ideas

We've discussed a number of key special publics you need to consider, and a few ideas for working with each one. But as you probably already know, or will soon discover, most involvement and informaton strategies can apply to a number of activities. What works with one group can also work with another. Accordingly, when you plan an activity or project, make sure you consider how it might be used or modified to work with each of your special publics. The following list may give you some ideas.

Information Dissemination

One of the real challenges faced by educators in the '80s is getting information to non-parents in a timely and credible manner. Most of these special publics either get their information about you from the news media or from discussions with friends and colleagues. Either way, you're usually in trouble.

What can you do about it? As far as the news media are concerned, continue to do your best to promote good relations. (See the guide on *Working With the Media* in this NSPRA **Basic School PR Kit**). But always keep in mind that the media focus on **news, and news is the unusual** . . . the failures and problems of society and its institutions. As much as we might wish it to be otherwise, that's the way it is and always will be. Your best defense is a good offense . . . finding and creating other workable methods of getting information to those special publics and their friends.

- **Use Natural Channels.** Before feeling you have to create your own publications and other information devices, look for existing communication channels. Each organization, business, and special interest group usually has its own channels of communication. For example, businesses usually have their own newsletters (house organs), and community groups and organizations produce some type of magazine or newsletter for members. Ask if they will publish your school information. If

you have done your homework — finding out their interests — you can shape your message accordingly. Not only can you save money, but you'll improve the credibility of your message since such publications have more believability than anything you can produce for that particular audience.

- **Send Out Speakers.** Speakers bureaus are nothing new, but not many school systems have used them effectively. The key is knowing what people want to hear about, putting together effective presentations, and promoting them. Civic groups and community organizations are continuously in need of programs. Many businesses have employee discussion groups. And religious institutions frequently provide opportunities for school speakers. The possibilities are endless. Select your best presenters. Some schools have even used students and report that the youths were well received. Whomever you use, make sure they're prepared. **Insist they use visuals or handouts.** Always leave materials behind, particularly information about your schools' strengths and how citizens can find out more. In addition to the usual annual mailing about your speakers, develop a comprehensive marketing effort. Keep an up-to-date list of program chairpersons — contact them regularly by phone, mail, and in person.
- **Invite People In.** Public opinion polls prove that the more people are involved in schools, the more likely they are to have a favorable opinion about them. Accordingly, every effort should be made to get your special publics into the schools so they can see and learn first hand. The more opportunities you provide, the better off you'll be. Sponsor special functions for non-parents, including breakfasts, luncheons and banquets, performances and presentations, courses, and tours. Invite special groups to school board meetings. The secret is determining a group's interest, putting together a worthwhile activity, and finding a creative way to get people excited about coming. Offer transportation . . . juggle the time to fit the group's schedule and do everything possible to eliminate excuses for not participating.
- **Use Mass Media.** News isn't the only product of mass media. The truth is, the broadcast and print media offer numerous other opportunities to tell the school story. While radio and television public service directors are swamped by institutions seeking time, they are always receptive to new and unusual ideas. Be creative, and remember you have a strong selling point in kids. Public service announcements for schools are

becoming popular. If you haven't tried this approach, do it now. Don't forget about radio talk shows and TV interview programs . . . if you have a cable system in your community, you're only limited by your imagination . . . and even locally produced special interest and general circulation publications sometimes offer public service space. Keep seeking opportunities to spread your school story.

- **Get Their Attention.** Most schools have a lot to brag about, but they have problems getting messages to their special publics. The problem is, non-parents don't have any so-called "normal" reasons to come into contact with your school communication materials. Take your messages to them. Displays in shopping centers, supermarkets, banks, airports, public buildings, and other busy sites can be effective. Some schools have even set up information tables to supplement the displays with handouts and discussions. Brief student performances get attention, but don't neglect the opportunity to also get a message across. And how about your brochures and other informational publications . . . are they getting to the special publics? Check your mailing lists to see that key groups and opinion leaders are included. Publications should also be distributed where non-parents congregate. Medical offices and waiting rooms, barbershops and beauty salons, apartment complexes, libraries, fast food outlets, cleaners and do-it-yourself laundries are just a few of the places to stock your materials. Businesses are sometimes willing to distribute certain materials to their employees . . . in display racks, on bulletin boards, in paycheck envelopes, and in eating or recreation areas. There are other enterprises that would like your materials for their business pursuits: realtors, newcomers organizations, and chambers of commerce.
- **Provide Answers.** Let your special publics know that you're interested in answering their questions and responding to their concerns about schools. Assign liaison staff persons to work with key groups and organizations. Set up a telephone hotline and promote it. Print and distribute "whom to call" lists. Continuously promote procedures for resolving conflicts and problems.
- **Getting Feedback.** Although communications is a two-way street, effective listening is a real challenge. And yet it's probably the most important part of the process — particularly if you're truly interested in what special publics know and think about schools. In fact, you'll find it difficult to adequately plan

and keep your communications effort on track unless you set up listening posts and constantly monitor them.

- **Conduct Surveys.** A growing method for getting feedback from non-parents is public opinion polling. However, there are many pitfalls. Such polls do require special expertise, are time consuming and can be expensive. They usually only provide benchmark information since they are also usually conducted on an annual basis. But surveys can provide a wealth of information for your use in program planning and implementation. If you're interested, consult the guide on *Surveys/ Feedback* in this NSPRA **Basic School PR Kit.** Meanwhile, you can supplement the more formal and extensive polls with informal surveys of your own. Put questionnaires in your newsletters . . . distribute feedback sheets at meetings . . . conduct informal surveys on special topics using the telephone.
- **Tap Key Communicators.** Another popular and effective technique for obtaining feedback as well as spreading the word is a low cost, two-way **network of key communicators.** The concept is simple — tap the community grapevine. And it works on a districtwide or individual school basis. Identify personalities who talk to and are believed by a large number of people. They aren't necessarily part of the formal power structure, although some are. You know who they are. Gather a diverse group of staff members to help you identify a representative key communicators network. Utilize mail or telephone to invite selected citizens to participate, beginning with a brief orientation meeting. The idea is to promote a continuing two-way exchange between key communicators and the schools. Ask them to call when they hear rumors or to seek answers for questions people are asking in the community. Seek their input on major issues and new ideas before you make decisions. And finally, keep them adequately informed through publications, phone calls, and frequent contact.
- **Use Advisers.** School advisory groups are extremely popular. Some of them are required by law or regulations. Obviously, establishing committees for the sake of having committees can be disastrous. All committees — whether for general input, program advice, or an ad hoc study — should be well organized and understand their roles. To insure additional feedback from special publics, make sure you include non-parents on as many of these advisory groups as possible. Encourage individual schools to do the same. It's a great way to involve and inform these hard-to-reach people, as well as learn about their concerns and opinions.

- **Monitor Natural Feedback.** Opportunities for feedback from non-parents and special publics abound. You've got to identify and take advantage of them. If your district has a telephone hotline, keep a list of the concerns and questions you receive. You can accomplish the same purpose by insisting that key offices do the same with their phone calls. Monitor comments made at school sponsored meetings, at board meetings, and on radio talk shows. Keep track of and analyze letters to the editor, as well as letters to the schools. Ask staff to bring back lists of questions asked at their speaking engagements. Sponsor community forums directly seeking comments, questions, concerns, and suggestions.
- **Get Involved in the Community.** If you want true feedback from non-parents, get personally involved in civic groups, service organizations, and/or social clubs comprised of your special publics. You and other key school staff should select appropriate organizations and become active members. Not only will the amount and quality of feedback increase, but your credibility will also be enhanced. It's difficult not to believe in someone who belongs to the same organization and with whom you share common goals and purposes.
- **Institutional Support.** Americans are not only down on their schools, but in increasing numbers they seem to be losing sight of the significance of public education. Obviously, no one expects citizens to support an organization they believe to be inferior or insensitive. But public education is vital to maintaining a strong nation. If there are problems, they can be corrected. Meanwhile, someone needs to be about the job of selling the importance of public education in general and promoting support of local public school systems in particular. The truth is, educators can't do it alone. Citizens from all walks of life, particularly those special publics (non-parents) must not only be involved, but lead the way.

Advocacy Groups

A number of school systems have had success in putting together diverse and broad-based organizations to serve as advocates for public education. Such organizations have issued endorsements and resolutions of support for schools and special programs. Many developed position or study papers aimed at identifying problems and seeking solutions to the problem. Others helped the school system in its dealings with the community establishment, in

relations with news media executives, and in intergovernmental assistance and relations.

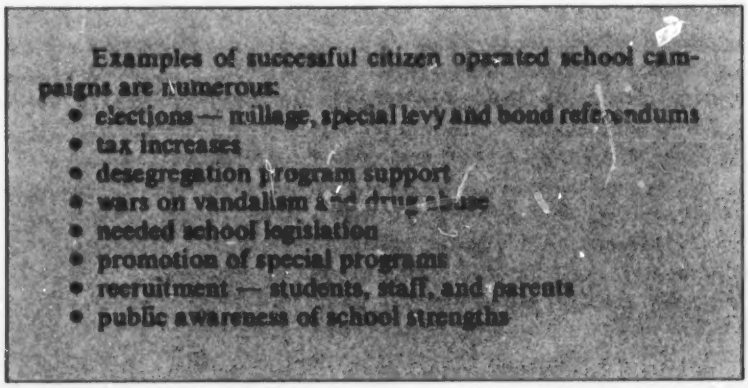
- **Formal Organizations.** One technique is to encourage the formulation of an independent organization established specifically for the purpose of supporting and assisting the school district. Many districts call such groups "friends of education" and sponsor periodic seminars and programs which provide information about education's progress and problems and suggest plans of action for the group to follow. Membership is normally composed of selected community leaders invited to serve by the district.
- **Groups Within Groups.** Another approach is to ask existing organizations to set up education committees or task forces within their own framework. Many civic and service groups, including chambers of commerce and the League of Women Voters, already have such mechanisms. School districts should undertake a systematic campaign to encourage such structures in all major community organizations.
- **Existing Advocacy Groups.** Many special interest groups are often avoided by educators because they're perceived to be negative or activist organizations. However, such groups can be of great assistance to the school system if good relations are established and both parties can agree to work on common interests. You don't necessarily have to see eye-to-eye but you can walk hand-in-hand on many things.

Campaigns

Although perceptions of non-parents and other special audiences are contributing to the declining public confidence in education, these groups **can** play a major role in selling the community on school needs. Campaigns run by the community — either individual organizations or broad-based ad hoc citizens committees — are more credible and as a result usually more successful than those conducted by schools.

When the need for a school campaign arises, educators should seek out community leaders to plan action programs including the setting of goals and identification of target audiences. With the assistance of school liaison staff, such citizen groups can also carry through on campaign implementation. Fund raising, materials development, speakers bureaus, statements of support, media visitations, and seeking public service time and billboard space — all

are legitimate activities which can be logically and effectively handled by community advocates.


Examples of successful citizen operated school campaigns are numerous:
• elections — millage, special levy and bond referendums
• tax increases
• desegregation program support
• wars on vandalism and drug abuse
• needed school legislation
• promotion of special programs
• recruitment — students, staff, and parents
• public awareness of school strengths

Community Expertise

Educators can derive multiple benefits by asking special publics to share their expertise. First and foremost, through such approaches schools can receive the best advice available — at no cost. In turn, the citizens themselves learn first-hand about the schools, the people who run them, and their successes and problems.

A number of techniques for utilizing citizen expertise have been and can be pursued. Ad hoc study groups, standing advisory committees, and loaned executives and staff are just a few. What can they do for you?

- **Instructional Program Advice.** Citizens with special knowledge and experience can provide invaluable advice in instructional program planning — making sure course curriculum, materials, and equipment are up to date and in keeping with the needs of the community. Career education, magnet schools, special education, textbook selection, and federal projects all lend themselves well to such involvement. Special ethnic perspectives and suggestions on avoiding sex discrimination in programs and materials are other possible contributions.
- **Management Assistance.** Many school systems have found that citizen input on business and management practices can

be of particular assistance. Various success stories have been documented on community involvement in facilities planning, purchasing practices, warehousing, data processing, financial forecasting, and staff recruiting. Even public relations help is available to those who seek it. PR firms and professional communication organizations frequently offer free assistance to worthwhile public school programs. In addition, businesses will probably be willing to assist by offering public relations professionals to advise and assist in planning and the development of materials.

- **Broad Program Input.** Although the concept of shared-decision making gets a lot of lip service by educators, properly planned and implemented it can be a significant method of involving special publics. Instructional needs assessment and priority setting, budget input and development, and long range goals-setting programs have all proved successful in some school districts. Such endeavors can't be taken lightly. They're time consuming and often frustrating. To be effective, they should be a systematic and on-going process. And, needless to say, if you ask for such input, you'd better use it and tell them how (or why you didn't). But in the long run, the results are worth the effort.
- **Help on Problems and Controversies.** An old, but still popular variation of citizen involvement, is the community task force appointed to study and help solve any one of the myriad of challenges faced by today's schools. Issues such as declining enrollment, school closings, sex education, church-state separation, junk foods, and discipline codes have all been resolved with the help of a short-term community advisory group. Such studies should include non-parents as well as parents.

Learning Assistance

One of the major benefits of involving special publics is direct assistance to the learning process. Businesses, community organizations, and other groups can provide invaluable expertise and resources that are available from no other source.

- **People Power.** Undoubtedly there are people in your community who have experiences and skills that can't be found among your faculty. If you can identify, recruit, and orient them properly, they can enrich your instructional program by serving as speakers, part-time instructors, or tutors. Some districts

have utilized community expertise in counseling and job placement services for students. Some companies will loan middle-management executives to serve in any number of instructional activities. Identify possible areas for such community assistance, and systematically seek out help.

- **Sponsors.** Due to size or other priorities, many businesses and groups can't provide human resources to help in schools. But they're still interested in assisting in some manner. It's up to you to not let them off the hook. Always have a list of activities or items such groups can sponsor. Standard lists could include scholarships, student activities, award programs, materials, equipment, special programs (Junior Great Books, Reading is Fundamental, and the like), community schools, and internships. If you're having a problem financing field trips, ask for help. Some groups and organizations have been known to take on the entire field trip effort — from planning and identifying sites to funding and making arrangements. The possibilities are only limited by your imagination and persuasive abilities.
- **Parent Services.** Certainly one way to improve instruction is to get parents involved in the process. While that is often easier said than done, perhaps non-parents can help schools with the job. In some communities, businesses have cooperated by releasing parents from work to attend teacher conferences and to make school visits. Others have sponsored courses for parents or have made company time and sites available for educators to present programs for parents. Keep selling the idea that parents must be more actively involved in the learning process, and ask those special publics to help you.
- **Services for Special Publics.** It has been said that it's more blessed to give than to receive. Up to this point, most suggestions have been designed to benefit schools. But schools also have a responsibility to give something to the community. Schools can provide numerous activities and services to the public — and through giving, will also receive good will and support.
- **Education Services.** Since the numbers of school age children and youth continue to decline, it's in the best interests of educators to begin expanding learning opportunities for citizens. Basic adult education, avocational courses, and apprenticeships are old standbys. Continuing education classes are also popular in such areas as insurance, taxes, consumer education, and driver education. And why not offer special courses for parents? Based on his annual opinion polls, George

Gallup says that parents are screaming for ways to help their kids in areas such as drug abuse, career planning, self discipline, and better study skills.

- **Recreation.** Schools are blessed with more facilities than any other institution in the community. And while it might cost a little to operate them during non-school hours, use of them for community recreation activities could turn out to be an investment rather than an expense. Offer sports leagues, games, and general recreational activities and see what happens. If there are other groups or agencies that offer similar services in your area, work with them in a cooperative venture.
- **Entertainment.** Think about the entertainment opportunities in your community. Does anyone offer a bigger or better variety than your schools? Probably not. The problem is, we often don't think of promoting school musicals, plays, and other performances in the general community. Some districts have even involved the community in performances by sponsoring community playhouses and talent shows. And how about athletic events? Americans are certainly sports minded, and your schools offer more variety than the "Wide World of Sports." Promote your school events as exciting yet inexpensive entertainment for the entire community.
- **Coordinating Mechanisms.** As discussed earlier, there is no way you can even attempt to undertake the myriad of possible involvement activities without organized **coordinating mechanisms.** It is assumed that your district has an overall public relations plan and assigned the responsibility to an appropriate administrator or a PR officer. Many of the ideas presented in this guide could be handled through a structure such as the **Dallas Network for Public Education.** Several other possible mechanisms, while not unusual or innovative, should be considered in your planning.
  - **Community Schools.** The community school concept is a natural tool for coordinating the involvement of many special publics and delivering many valuable services to the community. Since such programs utilize school facilities, many non-parents can see a tangible benefit from their taxes. And because community schools usually have a community based advisory group, which surveys the public to identify needs and works with a variety of other groups and agencies to deliver services, there is no end to the involvement possibilities.
  - **Volunteer Programs.** Another common technique for

orchestrating the community's human resources is the school volunteer program. A variety of approaches have been tried in school districts around the country. While such programs can help you improve learning as well as involve citizens, they are double-edged blades. In other words, don't begin a volunteer effort unless you are committed to giving it adequate support and organization. Volunteers can serve in a variety of ways, but first there has to be adequate orientation and training . . . for both the volunteers and the staff that works with them. Use volunteers, but do it properly.

— **Adopt-a-School.** A popular and growing technique involves asking businesses and community groups to actually adopt an individual school. The term "adopt-a-school" means that a group has committed itself to fulfilling some needs of a particular school. The adopter is not asked to fill all the needs of that school . . . the adopter offers to help in ways that match the capabilities of the adopting group. An adopter may supply a school (or schools) with any or all of the following: volunteers; sponsorship of activities; funding of equipment, programs, or materials; or expertise. The most important quality about an adoption, though, is the interest that a group expresses in the success of the adopted school. The challenge is to find ways for the adopting group to help that are satisfying, both to them and to the school. And like the volunteer program, adopt-a-school can be a negative experience without proper planning, coordination, and continuous care and feeding.

Chapter 4
Evaluating Your Efforts

Evaluation or assessment, whichever you call it, is a highly significant and necessary part of your overall efforts to involve your special publics. Without it, you may be spinning your wheels . . . wasting time and effort on something that really isn't paying any dividends.

The smart educator knows that evaluation must be a part of the overall game plan . . . not only to insure the effectiveness of the involvement and communications effort, but to keep one step ahead of the informal appraisal being conducted by the school system's many publics.

Unfortunately, not many of us take the time to adequately assess our efforts . . . particularly when it comes to the PR program. Determining whether or not your efforts with special publics are appropriate and effective — not only after the project is over, but preferably during the activity — in order to keep it on course — is essential.

How Do We Begin?

There are those who believe that a standard instrument for evaluating involvement and communications efforts is impossible to develop. This theory can be illustrated in an analogy involving communications and instruction. Most educators believe that to be truly effective, instruction has to be individualized to meet the needs of each youngster. PR people have the same belief about their profession. Each public has its own peculiar interests, understandings, needs, and desires. Accordingly, public relations efforts have to be tailored to meet the situation.

Assessing your involvement efforts can be a complex process. Literally hundreds of elements enter into your overall involvement program. And the value of a given activity is determined by how well it performs its own intended function. Certain communications and involvement activities are most valuable for informative pur-

poses, others provide interpretation through interaction, and still others are designed to bring the school and community together. The value of an activity is affected by its own appropriateness in a given situation or at a given time.

For example, a parent with three children in your school system may think your newsletter is informative . . . but the senior citizen may find nothing of interest and consider the whole thing a waste of money. Would you say that the community meeting was more effective the night 350 people showed up to hear the coach review the football season or the night 30 came to learn more about the benefits of career education?

The trick is to develop an individual evaluation strategy for each program activity, keeping in mind the circumstances and variables involved. No involvement effort can be accurately or fully assessed solely in terms of numbers of activities, or in terms of how well those activities are performed.

Steps To Consider

There are several steps or ideas you should consider in putting your evaluation strategy together.

Make sure your PR plan is on target. Go back and take a look at your overall plan and its components.

- **Set Up an Early Warning System.** Analyzing the community and school climate, balancing your involvement activities, and determining your audiences' interests are all necessary in assuring the effectiveness of your program. You might also want to consider the development of an **early warning system.** Such an approach not only helps you keep your plan on target, but it also reduces the possibility that you set the wrong priorities in the first place.

  Such an early warning system must gather its data through informal means of evaluation, and accordingly is a highly subjective approach. But it can also be inexpensive and very effective. There are many opportunities for you and your staff to informally assess the impact of your involvement efforts. Through an organized and systematic plan to collect and analyze such data, you can set up your early warning system. Many of the early warning techniques are similar to the previously discussed ideas on getting feedback:

  - monitor letters and phone calls, frequently analyzing criticisms, comments, questions, observations, and suggestions.

- keep tabs on the climate of the community, watching whether news reports and editorial comments have been generally favorable and if the public possesses a sincere interest in education . . . keep a clipping book.
- ask staff to regularly report on the informal remarks made by individuals in the course of conversation — over the fence, at the grocery store, during social gatherings, at church, and at civic and service club meetings.
- Study election results . . . how many people turned out . . . who advocated what, and how did they fare?
- carefully monitor school board meeting activities . . . issues, how members are lined up, how many citizens are attending, and what's being said by whom.
- monitor public interest in and support of school activities and programs . . . how many people participated in what ways?

- keep tabs on the membership in advisory groups . . . watch the attendance and amount of active and meaningful participation.
- take note of the willingness of individuals and organizations to cooperate . . . is there a trend?
- maintain a list of the requests you get from the community and note how well you and staff are following through.

- **Survey Your Audiences.** As has been continuously pointed out, each component of your involvement effort needs its own assessment strategy. And again, each one has a better chance of succeeding if you plan well in the beginning. Many materials are available on producing effective publications, working with the media, how to run a productive meeting, community analysis techniques, the ingredients necessary for a good volunteer program, and on and on. While such ideas are input rather than output oriented, they can be valuable in the development of tailor made evaluation instruments.

- **Use Assessment Groups.** An effective and often sobering method for evaluating your efforts is to establish an advisory group specifically for assessment purposes. Such a group should be broad-based, including some citizens who are involved in your activities . . . citizens who aren't involved . . . citizens and staff who helped put your plan together . . . and those involved in the implementation of it. Such a group should meet on a regular basis. The major benefit of such a group is to help you make mid-course corrections in your efforts, and to help prepare assessment reports for the board of education on the merits and effectiveness of your program.

Chapter 5
Summary

Today, two-thirds to three-fourths of the adult population no longer have children in school. This means that not only has this new majority lost direct interest in our schools, but they've become more difficult to reach through traditional public relations activities.

New and creative efforts are required if we're to reach this critical group of special publics. We've got to sharpen our community analysis skills and identify the key groups and individuals that must be involved. We've got to plan unusual and exciting activities designed to involve non-parents in a meaningful way. And we've got to commit the resources of the district, and at least "25 hours" of our time each day to make sure our efforts are worthwhile and on target.

If public education is to survive the decade of the '80s we've got to dedicate ourselves to some new basic principles:

- Our schools must provide a new group of educated citizens with the personal resources to advance and meet the needs of a complicated and changing society.
- Our constituents must be reassured that a strong public school system can enhance the lives and potential of their children and grandchildren both economically and personally.
- Young families must feel confident that our schools will meet their children's needs.
- Employers must feel the schools can provide good employees for the marketplace.
- The community in general must feel that its involvement with schools is welcome and can improve the quality of education.
- And, finally, for the non-consumers of the public schools, the image of the school system must be compatible with the image of a progressive community that provides a high quality of life for all its citizens.

America's great experiment of educating all children of all people is in trouble. While public education has done a remarkable job, it's gone about as far as it can alone.

The fact is, schools as we know them and even American democracy are at stake. How well we do in the months and years ahead may depend to a great extent upon how well we learn to involve the new majority . . . **those special publics.**

The main business of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), formed in 1935, is to help bring about better citizen understanding of the objectives, accomplishments, and needs of schools. NSPRA's mission is to build support for education through responsible public relations and communication.

If the duties of your position call for communicating with the public or others in the field of education, NSPRA membership is a must for you. NSPRA member services include: *PARAGRAPHS* (member newsletter), Public Relations Resource Center, Research Assistance, PR Hotline Counseling Service, Personnel Clearinghouse, National Representation, reduced rates for members at NSPRA's annual National Seminar and a voluntary accreditation program. There are four categories of NSPRA membership: institutional, professional, associate, and student.

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To order additional titles of "*Basic School PR Guides,*" or to obtain information about NSPRA membership, products and services, contact: National School Public Relations Association, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209, (703) 528-5840.